AQA

GCSE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 1 Explorations in creative reading and writing

Insert

The source that follows is:

Source A: 21st Century prose-fiction

The Life of Pi by Yann Martel

An extract from the middle of a novel written in 2001

Please turn the page over to see the source

Source A

This extract is from the middle of a novel. The narrator, a teenage boy called Pi, is in a large lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean. There are no people with him in the lifeboat but there are several animals, including an orang-utan, a zebra and a hyena.

It was the hyena that worried me. I had not forgotten Father's words. Hyenas attack in packs whatever animal can be run down. They go for zebras, gnus and water buffaloes, and not only the old or the infirm in a herd but full-grown members too. They are hardy attackers, rising up from buttings and kickings immediately, never giving up for simple lack of will. And they are clever; anything that can be distracted from its mother is good.

I could hear the hyena whining. I clung to the hope that a zebra, a familiar prey, and an orang-utan, an unfamiliar one, would distract it from thoughts of me. I kept one eye on the horizon, one eye on the other end of the lifeboat.

I am not one to hold a prejudice against any animal, but it is a plain fact that the spotted hyena is not well served by its appearance. It is ugly beyond redemption. Its shaggy, coarse coat is a bungled mix of colours, with the spots having none of the classy ostentation of a leopard's, they look rather like the symptoms of a skin disease. The head is broad and too massive, with a high forehead, like that of a bear, but suffering from a receding hairline, and with ears that look ridiculously mouse-like, large and round, when they haven't been torn off in battle. The mouth is forever open and panting. The nostrils are too big. The tail is scraggly and unwagging. All the parts put together look doglike, but like no dog anyone would want as a pet.

I was hoping the hyena would stay under the tarpaulin. I was disappointed. Nearly immediately it leapt over the zebra and onto the stern bench. There it turned on itself a few times, whimpering and hesitating. I wondered what it was going to do next. The answer came quickly: it brought its head low and ran around the zebra in a circle, transforming the stern bench, the side benches and the cross bench just beyond the tarpaulin into a twenty-five-foot indoor track. It did one lap-two-three-four-five-and onwards, non-stop, till I lost count. And the whole time, lap after lap, it went yip yip yip yip yip in a high-pitched way.

My reaction, once again, was very slow. I was seized by fear and could only watch. The beast was going at a good clip, and it was no small animal. The beating of its legs against the benches made the whole boat shake, and its claws were loudly clicking on their surface. Each time it came from the stern I tensed. It was hair-raising enough to see the thing racing my way; worse still was the fear that it would keep going straight.

After a number of laps it stopped short at the stern bench and crouched, directing its gaze downwards, to the space below the tarpaulin. It lifted its eyes and rested them upon me. The look was nearly the typical look of a hyena – blank and frank, jaw hanging open, big ears sticking up rigidly, eyes bright and black. I prepared for my end. For nothing. It started running in circles again.

When an animal decides to do something, it can do it for a very long time. All morning the hyena ran in circles going yip yip yip yip yip. Every time the hyena paused at the stern bench, my heart jumped. And as much as I wanted to direct my attention to the horizon, to where my salvation lay, it kept straying back to this maniacal beast.

Things ended in typical hyena fashion. It stopped at the stern and started producing deep groans interrupted by fits of heavy panting. I pushed myself away on the oar till only the tips of my feet were holding on to the boat. The animal hacked and coughed. Abruptly it vomited. A gush landed behind the zebra. The hyena dropped into what it had just produced. It stayed there, shaking and whining and turning around on itself, exploring the furthest confines of animal anguish. It did not move from the restricted space for the rest of the day.

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